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THE POLITICS OF DENIAL: AUSTRALIA AND EAST TIMOR

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Summary

This paper argues that official Indonesian and Australian policy on East Timor are characterised by 'denialism', a reflex which individuals, institutions and societies can use to block out, suppress or distort reality which is traumatic or problematic. This attitude is first and foremost a denial of the history and reality in East Timor. Parallels exist in many countries including Australia, which, like South Africa, is currently struggling to come to terms with past treatment of indigenous people and to face up to what this acknowledgement means in legal, political and economic terms. Denial, distortion and misrepresentation of the facts makes dialogue impossible and is a major impediment to a lasting settlement. Denialism also highlights the need for careful documentation of the record.

Unlike Portugal, white Australia is a relatively young society and we are only now - at the end of the 20th century - beginning to discover who, where and what we are, in relation to our actual social and physical milieu. As the term "downunder" suggests, for many generations we have thought of Australia as a European outpost. Our only cultural reference points were in Europe. Now, as a friend of mine recently put it, the recognition that we are an agglomeration of cultural groups living on Aboriginal land, geographically in Asia, is just dawning.

Both of these references - to living on Aboriginal land and being in Asia - have a bearing on Australia's involvement with and approaches to East Timor. Our recognition that we live in Asia and must engage or "enmesh" with Asia (to use Paul Keating's graphic term) has had profound, indeed calamitous, consequences for our dealings as a nation with East Timor. Here, however, I would like to focus on our Aboriginal experience and to offer some reflections in relation to East Timor. In doing so, I am mindful that Indonesia has sometimes used Australia's treatment of aborigines to hit back in response to criticism of Indonesian behaviour in East Timor.

Like South Africa, Australia is currently engaged in a bold, social experiment. This historic project is about building a new relationship between our indigenous peoples (the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians) and the wider community. In itself, this is an acknowledgement that the old relationship left much to be desired, and was in fact racist, genocidal and a creature of shame. We are basically re-defining ourselves in relation to the oldest living culture in the world. For some, like me, its a journey of discovery and enlightenment. I feel like a blind man who has suddenly recovered his sight. For others, its painful, traumatic and deeply unsettling. It means change, a complete u-turn. It means accepting - indeed embracing - what we previously rejected, valuing what we previously placed no value on, re-thinking notions of land and law, and making important choices about what kind of nation we want to be.

The official name given to this process is 'reconciliation'. Recently I was priveleged to join 1800 people from all walks of life at a landmark 'Reconciliation Convention' in Melbourne. The Convention was held five years after an equally historic, all-party and unanimous decision by the

Australian parliament in 1991 to devote 10 years of national effort to re-building black and white relationships on new foundations in Australia. The Convention, which of course involved many indigenous Australians, was a deeply moving experience. 'One of life's rare experiences', said a former Government Minister. However, while I listened, cried, sat in stunned silence, talked, and applauded till my hands ached with countless standing ovations, I could not help but think continually of East Timor and the similarities and lessons this extraordinary process has for the people of East Timor, our fellow citizens and near neighbours.

I know that the word 'reconciliation' will make East Timorese uncomfortable, as it does many indigenous Australians. 'Reconciliation' feels negative, submissive, weak - the opposite of what the East Timorese have shown they are. It carries strong overtones of 'forgive and forget'. It suggests that the victims should ultimately carry the cost of what has been done to them in the interests of the common good, leaving the oppressor chastened but otherwise absolved of responsibility. It suggests, writes Professor Colin Tatz, Director of the Centre for Comparative Genocide Studies in Sydney, that it is the victims "who must agree to the diminution, or even abolition, of that shared historical memory which holds victims groups together. It is they who must concur in the substitution of 'their' memory by 'our' memory and 'their' history by 'our' history". The term 'reconciliation' also has had a bad press for me in relation to East Timor because Senator Gareth Evans used it when he was Australian Foreign Minister and even claimed once, virtually on the eve of the Dili massacre, in an address to Amnesty International that 'reconciliation' in East Timor was virtually complete, meaning that most East Timorese had come to accept integration. How wrong he was.

It is not my purpose to apply 'reconciliation' to East Timor or to compare the East Timorese to Australian Aborigines. However, I would would like to suggest - that properly understood and used - 'reconciliation' may be a helpful notion and process in terms of addressing and healing the sometimes painful relations and ruptures that have occurred in East Timorese society, especially following events in 1975. It may also be that the sort of reconciliation being sought in Australia would be helpful and relevant in Indonesian society, perhaps particularly in relation to the re-making and healing of relations between the many victims and their families and associates of the 1965-67 pogroms and wider Indonesian society.

'Reconciliation' has a different, more robust and positive meaning in the current Australian context. It does not mean reconciling yourself to your fate, that like a death there's nothing you can do. It is being used in precisely the opposite sense. It means new beginnings, re-birth, starting again in hope, new relationships based on equity, mutual respect and human rights. South Africa is engaged in the same process of renewal, but using the different mechanism of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Nelson Mandela personifies this sort of reconciliation.

In its use of the term, the Australian Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation seems to me to stress two elements above all: one, respect for human rights; two, facing up to the truth, the facts both as they exist now and in the historical past.

The message is that there can be no reconciliation without respect for the whole range of human rights the Aboriginal people should enjoy - civil, political, social, economic, and cultural. I think this is relevant to East Timor, where it has been demonstrated often that development without rights is doomed to failure. Both Australia and Indonesia spend large sums of money on development projects in Australia and East Timor respectively. Both approaches manifestly fail in important respects. Both governments deplore the lack of enthusiasm and participation in what government is doing through its projects. Why? Part of the answer lies in the fact that people do not feel they are valued or respected and that fundamental issues of rights, participation, and control are not being addressed. Native title and access to land to gather bush food and medicine is ultimately as important to health as provision of a modern medical clinic. In East Timor, researchers find that East Timorese are more positive about their church than their local Indonesian government supplied clinic. Speaking at the Reconciliation Convention, the Prime Minister John Howard stressed the

need for practical measures to address the appalling health and other problems in the Aboriginal community but, in the same speech, he effectively announced the extinguishment of native title. Welfare addresses the body, not the spirit.

Let me quote the words of one Aboriginal woman to convey what lack for human rights means in personal terms. In a book published last year an elderly Aboriginal woman, Connie Nungulla McDonald, said this about herself: "When I made my entrance into the world, little did I know that all my life I would be fighting for equality and the right to be treated as a human being. Little did I know of the struggle I would have uncovering some of the secrets of my birth... And little did I know of the conflicts that awaited me as I tried to find out where I belong. I am a human being and not an animal. I often wonder to myself for how many more years I, and the rest of the Aboriginal race, will have to prove to white society that we are ordinary human beings like them".

Many East Timorese can identify with these words. Bishop Belo was pilloried when he said last year after receiving the Nobel Peace Prize that the East Timorese are treated like animals.

The other imperative laboured by the advocates of reconciliation is 'the path to history'. To lift the shadow from Australia's past and reveal in all its actuality and ugliness the facts of history. This is not advocated as knowledge for knowledge's sake or to make everybody feel bad. Rather it is to recognise that white, comfortable Australians cannot even begin to understand the Aboriginal people and their circumstances, and begin to relate to them in new and positive ways, until they know and face the reality of black history. It is also because the past is never fully gone but stays to shape what we are and what we do. As William Faulkner once wrote, "the past is not dead and gone; it isn't even past".

The facts of Aboriginal history are not pleasant. Aborigines did not have the vote till 1967. They were not counted in the national census till 1967. The recently released bombshell report on the 'stolen generation' (as many as 100,000 Aboriginal children taken from their families to be brought up by whites) concluded that this government sanctioned practice was 'genocide'. Until 1992, Australia's legal system did not recognise native title - though Aborigines have an intense, spiritual affinity for the land - and, until the historic High Court ruling on Mabo in 1992, regarded Australia as 'terra nullius' (an empty country) at the point of European settlement 200 years ago. There were many massacres. Today Aborigines are only 2% of the population, some 300,000 out of 18 million people.

I want to say at this point that facing these facts is not proving easy in Australia. Many are ignorant of our past. None of my generation were taught anything at all about Aboriginal history or culture at school. Growing up we never met an Aborigine and my parents did not talk about them. Yet in the cemetery where my mother and father are both buried is an obelisk built in 1883 (only 50 years after European arrival in the area) and inscribed "In memory of the Aborigines of this district. Herein lies the body of the chief Wombeetch Puyuun and last of the local tribes". Others feel uncomfortable and uneasy about this history and believe it should be balanced by positive history about the achievements of early European settlement. The Prime Minister attacks it as 'black armband' history. Others say there is nothing to be gained from the past and we should look to the future.

This brings me to the central point of my paper. I wish to argue that Indonesia and, to a certain extent, Australia have engaged in a similar response to the 'black' history of East Timor. Colin Tatz calls it 'denialism'. It means avoiding the truth by suppressing, sanitising, denying or perverting the reality. It is fundamentally important to reconciliation and to the future of East Timor because in both instances denying what has happened acts as a roadblock or an impediment to addressing the real issue and finding solutions. Mark Twain in his novel 'The Mysterious Stranger' describes it like this: "Next the statesman will invent cheap lies, putting the blame upon the nation that is attacked and every man will be glad of those consience-soothing falsities, and will diligently study them, and refuse to examine any refutations of them; and thus he will by and by convince himself that the war

is just, and will thank God for the better sleep he enjoys after this process of grotesque self-deception".

Denialism is not, of course, unique to these situations. It is a well-known psychiatric condition which psychoanalysts believe can arrest development and growth. As a Catholic I am familiar with it in the Church. The real history of the Catholic Church reads like a Mills and Boon potboiler but, at least when I was young, the unseemly, salacious bits were all edited out and suppressed. We were led to believe the Church was a communion of saints and were taught what was called 'apologetics' so we could rebut the scandalous claims of the Protestants who said the Catholic church was a communion of sinners (we found out later they were telling the truth). Japan refuses to teach the true history of the Pacific war in its schools. Indonesia has repressed the terrible events of 1965 and demonised the PKI. The Irish repressed the great potato famine for 150 years. Facing the facts about Stalin took 50 years in the Soviet Union and contributed to the collapse of communism there and elsewhere.

The first point I want to make in relation to East Timor is that history matters. As Indonesia and all governments know, the truth is a most potent instrument for change and justice. Many of us here have devoted a good portion of our lives to documenting and making known the story of East Timor. Chiselled in stone on the facade of the New York Public Library, across the street from the Human Rights Watch office, are the words "But above all things truth beareth away the victory'. One could not think of a finer motto for a library or a human rights organisation like Asia Watch, or the East Timor movement.

An extraordinary effort, resources and skill, not to mention courage, ingenuity and risk-taking over many years has gone into the effort to 'take the path of history' and to keep the spotlight on East Timor by telling the story as it unfolded. This has happened in East Timor and outside, especially in the early years in Portugal, Australia, New York and Washington. One thinks of Alarico Fernandes broadcasting by radio to Darwin at the height of the Indonesian invasion, letters from East Timor arriving in Australia postmarked Rome, East Timorese smuggling documents to visiting delegations, caring Indonesians with access to East Timor passing on copies of official correspondence, copies of Xanana Gusmao's defence being handed to the media in New York about the same time as the court in Dili was refusing his right to make a statement, moving appeals by individuals and church groups that East Timor not be forgotten, and not least detailed reports of human rights violations laboriously written long hand on exercise book pages and sent out, like letters from prison, in the hope that someone somewhere might do something.

We know now that this battle has been won decisively in East Timor's favour. Two days ago I gave a talk on East Timor in Melbourne to 200 senior high school students who were doing a major assignment on East Timor as part of their international relations course. The course organiser told me that, in his estimation, 98% of the students would side with East Timor. Just before this I had a letter from an Australian friend visiting Europe. He took part in the tenth annual Ireland Famine Walk at which a keynote speaker was an East Timorese. Shortly after that, in June, my friend visited Liverpool Cathedral to find, to his great surprise, that Bishop Belo would be guest at that day's High Mass. 'Timor is everywhere', my friend observed.

It is said history is written by the victor. In the case of East Timor, history is being written by 'the vanquished' and, though there is still a long way to go, this reversal of roles will undoubtedly have a bearing on the outcome. The recording and documenting of East Timor's experience and history remains absolutely critical. I guard and maintain the unique archives housed at the ACFOA Human Rights Office in Melbourne with great care, because the day will come when the files of ABRI, KOPKAMTIB, BAIS and other Indonesian government departments will yield their terrible secrets and our humble records will assist. I look forward to the day when researchers of the calibre of Jim Dunn, John Waddingham, Peter Carey, George Aditjondro and others give more attention to East Timor, including scholarly research conducted at a critical distance in a depoliticised framework.

The experience of Indonesia's soldiers in East Timor remains veiled in secrecy. The great famine of 1978-79 has also barely been recorded.

Broad public opinion in Australia is also strongly sympathetic to the East Timorese. There have been many converts to the East Timor issue in recent years. These include significant opinion-makers like senior journalists, senior academics and church leaders who previously were hostile or agnostic. Their concern for East Timor does not mean that they are anti-Indonesian or opposed to broad and active Australia-Indonesia relationships. On the contrary, what is particularly significant, and important, is that people with some influence who understand Indonesia and support Australia-Indonesia relations have re-thought their views on East Timor and have widened their vision to include concern for East Timor.

This seems to me to be a particularly significant development, indeed a breakthrough, and presents an important opportunity in the Australian context. It is important some the East Timor movement recognise this opportunity and find ways of engaging with these sectors, including conservative circles and Australia's 'establishment'. This should include recognition of the role of business and dialogue with Australian business leaders and corporations active in Indonesia. Little is known of their attitudes but there should not be a reflex assumption that they are negative or an ideologically-driven rejection of the idea on principle. Effective engagement with these people will require adding a new level of skill, sophistication and knowledge to our modus operandi. New forums, new language and new alliances are needed. This undertaking will almost certainly require the creation of a new East Timor 'movement', supplementary to what exists. A people's movement for East Timor is vital and essential. In no sense should it be diminished or abandoned. On the contrary, the people's movement has served East Timor exceptionally and should continue to have substantial time and resources devoted to it. Noise and protest to catch the media's attention also has its place. But it is no longer enough simply to shout 'Indonesia out of East Timor' or to engage in the wholesale denunciation of Australia-Indonesia relations.

Public support not withstanding, denialism has been - and remains - a hallmark of the official Australian approach to the East Timor question. One thinks of the shut down of the Darwin based radio link in 1976, regular official insistence in the 80s that the issue was dead and Australians should look to the future, official disagreement or qualifying of reports from East Timor.

The former Labor Prime Minister and elder statesman, Gough Whitlam is the outstanding illustration of denialism on East Timor at work in Australia. Many refer to his 'blind spot' on East Timor and regret that he has disqualified himself from a more constructive role at a time when individuals of his stature are needed. Though not Prime Minister at the actual moment of the Indonesian invasion, Mr Whitlam was in power up to a month before that adventure and during the critical previous two years. He is widely believed to have conceded to President Suharto, with whom he had a close rapport, that East Timor would be best served as part of Indonesia (though, he argued, the East Timorese should agree to this arrangement).

Mr Whitlam is widely admired for many positive initiatives during his term as Prime Minister, but refuses to concede that he has any reponsibility for the tragic fate that befell East Timor and is remorseless in his pursuit of his critics. In 1981 I attended the Permanent Peoples Tribunal in Lisbon and tabled evidence critical of Mr Whitlam and some other Australian figures on East Timor. The following year, during an Australian Senate hearing into East Timor which I was instrumental in establishing, Mr Whitlam revealed that he has threatened to sue the Catholic Church in Australia for circulating my Lisbon statement, which he regarded as 'defamatory', and that he had exacted a written apology from Cardinal Freeman of Sydney.

More and more isolated, Mr Whitlam continues to defend both Indonesia and himself and to blame others for the situation in East Timor. He devotes 20 pages to East Timor in his new book 'Abiding Interests' which has just been published in Australia. In a section headed 'Indonesia' within a chapter titled 'Legacy of Empires in Asia', Mr Whitlam argues that he has been mis-represented and that his

version of history will be exonerated when the 30 year rule permits the public release of official records in 2005. I suppose all we can do is to wait and see.

It should not go unremarked, however, that one has to look very hard in 'Abiding Interests' to find even a hint of muted criticism of Indonesia in these 20 pages of text. I found only two oblique references. On page 70 he quotes from a speech he gave in Melbourne soon after the Dili massacre when he said "the Indonesian authorities should have acted with more restraint". And, even milder, on page 79 he gives advice to "to Australians who wish to advance human rights in Dili and other centres", conceding by implication that there are human rights problems in East Timor.

Nor should it go unremarked that he consistently accommodates Indonesia in his version of events and seeks to place the onus of responsibility not on Indonesia but on other participants, not least Fretilin and Portugal. Reading his new book one is left with the impression that Indonesia is the innocent party and has been hard done by. On page 79 he points out that Indonesia has kept Portugese street names in Dili and, with some naivety, praises Indonesia 'for an abiding commitment to a multicultural society'. He makes no reference, however, to the fact that contemporary East Timorese history and national figures like Nicolau Lobato do not figure in the school curriculum in East Timor. He offers no words of sympathy or encouragement to the East Timorese. Nor has he made mention of considerable efforts after leaving the office of Prime Minister to convince the world that Indonesia's incorporation of East Timor should be supported. He actions to that end included personal intervention at the UN and lobbying of the Australian government to use all its diplomatic resources to work for the defeat of resolutions on East Timor at the General Assembly.

Denialism on East Timor is not unique to Mr Whitlam. In New York in 1979 I was stunned to hear the Pope, John Paul II, stating on US Television in support of a CRS fundraising appeal that the shocking 1978-79 famine in East Timor was due to drought. The current Australian Foreign Minister, Alexander Downer, declined to co-sponsor a human rights resolution on East Timor at the recent UN Commission on Human Rights. Diplomats speaking for Australia told the Commission that the Indonesian Government "is making a serious effort to address human rights abuses in East Timor".

If it is true that the answer to the East Timor problem lies in Indonesia, what is infinitely more disturbing than Mr Whitlam's apologia is the steadfast refusal of the Indonesian government to acknowledge the history and present reality of East Timor.

In an excellent article in Inside Indonesia, September 1993, Jim Dunn argued that a settlement of the issue will not be possible until Indonesia stops perverting the truth. Dunn stated his belief that "the accommodating responses of informed officials in (foreign) governments have virtually encouraged Indonesian officials and politicians to stick doggedly to their distorted versions of how and why the former Portuguese colony was invaded and its decolonisation aborted".

Dunn went on to analyse a speech on East Timor given at the University of East Timor on 21 May 1993 by Indonesia's Foreign Minister, Ali Alatas. The thrust of the Alatas lecture was that in 1974-75 Indonesia was an innocent party to a situation that was largely the fault of the Portuguese, who were to blame for not developing East Timor, politically or economically. The Portuguese fled abandoning their weak decolonisation program, leading to a civil war, the prolonging of which forced a reluctant Indonesia to intervene. Fretilin, he said, carried out widespread killings. Dunn, an acknowledged international expert on East Timor, states that these and similar assertions by Alatas on that occasion misrepresent the facts and are 'sheer nonsense'. Furthermore, Alatas cannot be excused on grounds of ignorance. Between 1974 and 1976 he was private secretary to the then Foreign Minister, Adam Malik, and was for a period a close aide to General Benny Murdani, the architect of the BAKIN/OPSUS plan to acquire East Timor by stealth.

Alatas concluded his lecture to his East Timorese audience by referring to the role of Jakarta's rule after 1976 in 'reducing casualties' and urging his listeners "to close our book on what happened and to think ahead". Dunn concludes his commentary with these words: "To one who has been observing our neighbour's affairs for some four decades, it seems that the refusal of Indonesian leaders to rise to the challenge of facing up to the ugliness of the past remains a major impediment to the nation's shift towards a just and human system of government" and a settlement of the East Timor issue. But there are some who will say this is a 'black arm band' approach to Indonesian history...

The Vice-Chairman of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Dr Alex Bouraine, spoke at the recent Reconciliation Convention in Melbourne. He described the South African process as a quest for reconciliation, not revenge. He conceded it was a deeply painful, risky and difficult undertaking and that they had only just taken the first step of an arduous journey. He stressed, however, the fundamental importance of truth-telling as a deliberate attempt to come to terms with what has happened, personally and as a country. He referred to El Salvador and said society cannot black out a chapter. For a peace settlement (which is what reconciliation is) to be workable and durable it must be based in the truth. He added that this requires and contributes to a restoration of the moral order because ultimately reconciliation is about rediscovery of the soul of society.

Nelson Mandela, who is synonymous with reconciliation, gave a news conference in Jakarta last Tuesday at the conclusion of a State visit to Jakarta. Acknowledging that now East Timor is discussed "in almost every corner of the globe", Mandela left an implicit message for the Indonesian government on the issue. He said, reported Patrick Walters in The Australian, that his own country had realised the vital importance of dialogue in helping settle its own internal conflict. Without dialogue, Mr Mandela said, South Africa would have engaged in one of the costliest and bloodiest civil wars in its history. Tragically, it has to be the other way round for East Timor. But, as Mr Whitlam wisely said recently, commenting on the Australian Government's plan to extinguish native title, the Government should act properly now and not prolong the struggle and pain as history and the dynamics of justice are against them. That is true for East Timor as well. The moment of truth and dialogue will surely come.